

ANJLI PANALAL DOSHI

Utilizing communication research findings for strengthening communication programme. NPFDB'S experience

Introduction

I shall highlight some communication research studies that have been conducted by the National Population and Family Development Board (NPFDB). The focus of this paper is on applied communication research and the applications of this research for communication intervention in the implementation of family development programmes.

A brief overview of the NPFDB is also provided as it will enhance understanding of the context or role of communication research in the Boards Information, Education and Communication (IEC) programme. The term IEC as used here is synonymous with communication and refers to both interpersonal and mass media.

The National Population and Family Development Board (NPFDB) was established under the Population and Family Development Act No. 42 of 1996 (revised 1988) as a Statutory body under the Prime Minister's Department. The NPFDB has since been placed under the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development since October 1990.

The Board's general objective is to plan and coordinate population and family development programmes and to advocate the strengthening and upholding of the family institution. Its specific objective is to enhance the awareness, knowledge and practice of positive family life styles to a level which would promote healthy, stable and resilient families. The functions of the NPFDB are in Appendix I.

The strategy used by the Board at the macro level is integration of factors pertaining to population and family into the socio-economic development planning through implementation of research activities; the preparation of policy recommendations, technical papers and plans of action; and the development of training modules as well as educational and learning materials. At the micro level, the Board implements family development programmes through reproductive health services; IEC activities and training.

Research programme

Several population and family development research and studies have been conducted by the Board. Some of the recent population and family development research activities conducted include Sub-National Population Study; Malaysian Population and Family Survey, 1994; Study on Adolescent Social Behavior, Malaysia 1994; Study on Secondary School Students; Study on Child Development; Parenting Patterns; Study on the Effect of Economic Development on Family and Gender Relations in Developing Countries in Asia in collaboration with UPM and the Kitakyushu Forum for Women, Japan; and monitoring and Evaluation of the Goals of World Summit for Children in Malaysia.

Reproductive health programme

The NPFDB is the coordinator for the National Family Planning Services Programme. Specialist Services which comprise of services such as infertility, andrology, calposcopy, menopause, laboratory diagnostic and cervical cancer screening are provided by the Specialist and Human Reproduction Centre, NPFDB Headquarters. Private clinics throughout the country also provide family planning services to the masses.

Information, Education and Communication (IEC) Programme
Programme IEC is a critical component and main intervention of the NPFDB's family development programme at the micro-level. The IEC programme uses multiple channels to disseminate information and education to its target audience. These include mass media, interpersonal communication and community mobilization.

Family development encompasses family life education activities (family relationships, parenting, child development), family counselling (marriage, adolescent, aging) and socio-psychological research. The various units in the IEC Division which contribute to programme development and implementation are the Field, Publications, Video, Communication Research and Library Documentation Centre are discussed.

Field activities

Dialogue sessions, group meetings, seminars, talks, courses and exhibitions have also been organized with the aim of disseminating information and educating all category of audiences on family development. The Board has focused its IEC activities on specific target audiences such as the political leaders, policy makers, implementors, top government officials, members of organizations, religious leaders, community leaders, parents and future parents. Training programmes involving the training of master trainers from agencies involved in the implementation of family development programmes are also conducted.

Video

The Board has explored various avenues in its efforts to disseminate information on population and family development to the people. It has been found that programmes produced in video would be ideal to cater both for training needs and information campaigns. The Video Unit of the IEC division set up in 1983 produces video tapes for distribution to the NPFDB clinics and other agencies, to be used in training, for viewing by the Board's clientele and loan to the general public. These productions are based on family development issues. Tapes are produced on prevention of accidents at home, good moral and religious values, enhancing communication, parenting, child development etc.

Publications

The NPFDB also produces various types of educational booklets and pamphlets and bulletins on health, medical and other related family development issues. These are either distributed free or sold to the public at a nominal fee. A magazine *TIMANG* was published once every two months.

The magazine was popular as it contained interesting educational articles on health, baby care, medical and other topical issues on family life and family development. However, the Board has since ceased production of the magazine.

Media

Various programmes have been identified in Radio and Television for infusion of Family Development messages. Most of these programme convey advice and information for parents on family development, population and reproductive health such as parenting, child development, gynecology, pregnancy health care and nutrition, counseling, social and other related areas.

The various youth, women and magazine programmes on radio are widely utilized to convey family development messages. Information dissemination activities pertaining to population and family developed conducted through the print media include special articles in the newspaper in conjunction with the National Family Day 1995, press/magazines interviews with the NPFDB officials, and newspaper columns/articles on family and parenting issues.

Communication research

Communication research is an important component in the Board's IEC programme. Its aim is to improve programmes as well as increase the possibility of achieving programme goals. Family development communication research is a broad framework which considers such aspects as : 1) determining the impact of communication programme on awareness, knowledge, attitudes, behavior and skills; 2) finding out the strengths and weaknesses of communication for suggesting improvements and 3) ascertaining the extent of accomplishment of programme objectives.

Basically research leads us to answers although not to all answers all the time. Communication research findings in combination with our personal inputs which include our own experiences, observations, perceptions etc. are utilized in the planning and implementation of programmes.

The main objective of the communication research unit is to conduct relevant research and utilize the findings to

strengthen the IEC programme. Its most important purpose is to enable programme planners to make informed decisions that will result in IEC programmes that reach more people with information they want, and can use and in well implemented programmes. In order to strengthen the IEC programme various kinds of communication research have been conducted over the years.

The communication research unit has conducted formative (planning stage), process evaluation and impact evaluation (to assess the effectiveness of the programme). Generally, the research is kept simple and to the point as what is needed is not the highest quality of evaluation but the most appropriate quality bearing in mind the human and financial resources available. The type of research conducted depends on the research goals, audience and programme objectives. Some of the major communication research studies conducted are discussed below.

1. Effectiveness of The NPFDB's Parenting Module

The general objective of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the National Population and Family Development Board's (NPFDB) parenting module among parents by examining the effects of exposure to the parenting module on parenting knowledge, attitudes, practices and skills (parenting KAPS). The specific objectives were : (1) to determine the changes in parenting Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices and Skills (KAPS) after exposure to the module, (2) to determine the participants perceptions of the parenting module, and (3) to determine the relationship between exposure to the parenting module and parenting KAPS.

The Pre-test-Post-test Control Group design was used for evaluating the NPFDB's parenting module. The FELDA Serting scheme in the state of Negeri Sembilan was purposively selected as the study site. The population for the study were the FELDA settlers and their spouses. The 80 respondents were randomly assigned to the experimental and control group.

Results of the study showed that parenting KAPS improved significantly from before to after exposure for the experimental group (TABLE 1). Generally, it was found that the participants had high perceptions of the module structure, usefulness and relevance of contents to their needs (Appendix

3). Results obtained suggested that exposure to the module was significantly and positively correlated with parenting knowledge ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.05$), parenting attitudes ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.05$), parenting practices ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.05$), parenting skills ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$).

TABLE 1.
Independent
t-Tests
Comparisons
of the Two
Groups
Responses to
the Parenting
KAPS
Variables

Scales	Pre-test		Post-test	
	mean (sd)	t-value (p)	mean (sd)	t-value(p)
<i>Parenting Knowledge</i>				
Control Group	44.63 (3.21)	0.45 (0.65)	43.88 (2.51)	6.11 (0.00)
Experimental Group	44.37 (2.71)		48.46 (3.99)	
<i>Parenting Attitudes</i>				
Control Group	42.93 (2.34)	1.01 (0.32)	43.37 (2.17)	5.96 (0.00)
Experimental Group	43.51 (2.83)		47.31 (3.55)	
<i>Parenting Practices</i>				
Control Group	27.10 (3.25)	2.36 (0.02)	26.61 (2.59)	3.18 (0.00)
Experimental Group	25.51 (2.71)		28.56 (2.91)	
<i>Parenting Skills</i>				
Control Group	25.05 (3.87)	1.71 (0.09)	25.15 (3.83)	1.53 (0.13)
Experimental Group	23.39 (4.82)		26.44 (3.70)	

The findings of the study above illustrated the effectiveness of the parenting module in terms of increasing the parenting KAPS of parents also provided valuable feedback to parenting programme developers and educators. Thus, it will be possible to offer the parenting module to other government agencies and voluntary organizations involved in parenting and family development for dissemination to their target groups.

The implications of this study go beyond the NPFDB. The findings will have implications for other organizations involved in family-related programmes as it may lead them to amend their programmes or formulate programmes using similar approaches and methodologies. The findings of this study will make a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge concerned with the effectiveness of parenting programmes in Malaysia. This is because hardly any studies have been done locally to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of parenting programmes that have been implemented. Results suggest that the parenting module should be

disseminated more widely to reach out to a greater number of parents.

2. National Study on Reproductive Health of Adolescents

The National Population and Family Development Board conducted a study on the Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices of a sample of adolescents aged 10-19 years in 1994. This study involving 2366 adolescents was a sub-sample of the Population and Family Study 1994 conducted by the NPFDB. This was followed by a Media Survey through selected media, i.e. *The Star*, *Majallah Remaja*, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, and *Malaysian Nambur* from August to October 1995, through which 1,555 adolescents aged 13-19 and 309 aged 20 years responded. A Qualitative Enquiry was also conducted in Lembah Klang, Johore Bahru, Trengganu, Sabah dan Sarawak during April-May 1996. A total of 297 adolescents and 104 adult responses were obtained and documented by trained facilitators.

The objectives of the Media Study and Focus Group Interview were to establish the status of the knowledge, attitude and practice of adolescents with regard to sexual reproductive health; to identify constraints that adolescents face in seeking information and services relating to sexual and reproductive health; and to obtain the participation of adolescents in the design and implementation of programmes and activities for their own well-being.

Some of the salient findings of the study include : most of the adolescents are not provided with information, education, counseling and support during this time which is a very stressful period when body changes affect their behavior, attitudes, personality and lifestyle; more than two thirds of adolescents have been exposed to various forms of material with either explicit or implied sexual connotations; and dating seems to be an accepted norm among the adolescents.

Based on the findings of the study, strategies and programmes suggested include : the family institution must be strengthened, and premarital courses and counseling need to be introduced; parents need to be educated on how to provide guidance and support to their adolescent children; adolescents need to be exposed to family life education courses which would provide them with information and knowledge of their

reproductive health; a curriculum for family health education needs to be developed which will address the issues of the study; and a Reproductive Health Programme for Adolescents will be developed to prevent emerging social problems such as teenage pregnancy, abandoned babies and spread of STDs and HIV/AIDS.

3. Baseline KAP Study on Family Development

In 1992, the NPFDB conducted a KAP study on family development among parents. The objectives of the study was to obtain the audience profile of the Board's target group; to get baseline information on the current KAP status of Family Development among parents and to obtain information on media habits and preferences among the target group. The information obtained will enable better planning of related communication programmes.

A total of 2,281 respondents were selected from throughout Peninsular Malaysia using systematic quota sampling. The criteria used in selecting respondents included sex, age, marital status, and ethnic group. The information obtained in this study included socio-economic, pregnancy and child care, parenting of school going children, parenting of adolescents, preparation for old age, husband-wife relationship, health and nutrition, attitudes towards parenting and health, and exposure to media. (TABLE 2)

In general, the findings of the study provided valuable information on the parenting/family development KAP of selected parents as well as information on mass media and interpersonal channels of communication utilized by the respondent which could be utilized in the formulation of strategies and programmes. Some of the recommendations made include : there was a felt-need for more in-depth information, the respondents preferred education programmes, multi-media approaches should be used as the respondents source of information was both mass media and interpersonal, and information personnel represent an important potential for disseminating parenting information as many of the respondents expressed interest in attending talks, courses and seminars on family development.

Methodology	very effective	effective	not effective	not effective at all	mean (sd)
	%	%	%	%	
1.Lectures	28.2	61.5	10.3	-	3.18 (0.60)
2.Role-play	33.3	61.5	5.2	-	3.28 (0.56)
3.Small-Group Discussions	23.1	69.2	7.7	-	3.15 (0.49)
4.Large-Group Discussions	23.1	66.6	10.3	-	3.31 (0.57)
5.Slides	17.9	82.1	-	-	3.18 (0.39)
6.Individual Exercise	12.8	66.7	20.5	-	3.26 (0.50)
7.Video	28.2	69.2	2.6	-	3.26 (0.50)
8.Additional Readings	23.1	71.8	5.1	-	3.18 (0.51)

Mean of Scale = 26.46 Std Deviation = 2.95

TABLE 2:
Participants
Perceptions of
the
Effectiveness
of the
Methodologies
Used (n=39)

4. Study on the Awareness of the Happy Family Campaign

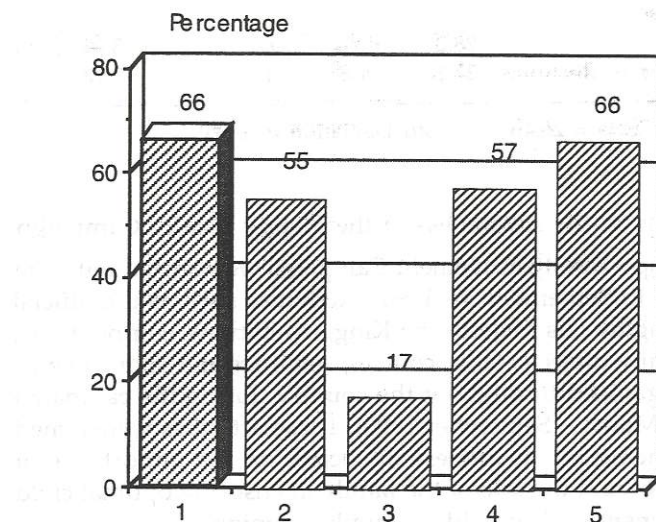
The Happy Family Movement Campaign was carried out from March 4 to September 30, 1990. Activities such as the official launching by His Majesty the King, exhibitions, competitions, community projects, talks, courses, seminars and sports events were organized throughout the country during the campaign period (March - September 1990). These activities were aimed at enhancing the awareness of society on the importance of family ties and the role of the family in ensuring optimal child development and upholding family happiness.

The mass media especially television and newspapers played an important role in creating awareness about the campaign among the respondents. Respondents were also exposed to the various publicity materials such as the theme song, posters, billboards and stickers produced during the campaign period.

A study was then conducted to evaluate the people's awareness and exposure to the activities of the Happy Family Campaign Movement. Quota sampling based on criteria such as sex, ethnic, residence was used to obtain the respondents for the study which was conducted throughout Peninsular Malaysia.

The evaluation findings suggest that the Happy Family Movement Campaign had an encouraging impact on the populace. About 66% of the 1177 respondents said they were aware of the campaign. On the whole, about 55% of the respondents knew why the campaign was held and almost 80% said the campaign was good and it should be continued (Appendix 4). About 60% of the respondents said the campaign had a positive influence on their daily lives as it made them more conscious of the importance of a happy family life and said they would inform and talk about the campaign to other people.

GRAPH 1.
Impact of
Happy Family
Campaign



Indicator

1. Aware of the campaign
2. Know why the campaign was held
3. Attended the various activities organised during the campaign period
4. Influence of the campaign in the lives of the respondents
5. Informing others about the campaign.

The findings also implied that there was a felt need among respondents for more information on Parenting/Family Life Education encompassing communication in the family, roles and responsibilities of family members, parenting techniques and child development. These needs have been addressed through subsequent IEC activities such as dialogues, talks and courses.

5. Evaluation of Timang Magazine

Timang was initiated and published by the National Population and Family Development Board in 1986. Its general objective was to educate parents by providing information on parenting and child development and to strengthen families. In the quest for continued growth and the desire to improve the magazine, a quantitative study utilizing mail-order questionnaires were sent to its subscribers to obtain a profile of its readers, their perceptions, expectations and satisfaction with Timang magazine. Out of the 700 questionnaires sent, only 112 were returned.

The respondents were mostly Malays (96%); 83% were females; 75% were in the 25-34 years age group and 12.5% were in the 20-24 year age group; 84% of the respondents were married; 5.4% had attended primary school, 39% had attended secondary school, 17% had university education and information was not available for 38% of the respondents.

The findings showed that the three areas most favored by the respondents were health, babies and young children. The respondents were least interested in contents related to love and marriage, recipes, crafts and fiction. Most of the respondents were satisfied with the coverage and content areas of the magazine.

The respondents felt that there should be more articles related to women's health, child-care and religion. They suggested there should be new features such as question and answers on child-care, family counseling and psychology.

Overall, the respondents were satisfied with the technical aspects of the magazine such as layout, quality of printing, photographs and cover. However, the respondents felt that the numbers of pages and the frequency of the publication should be increased. The respondents regarded the magazine as an important source of information and education on parenting issues.

Based on the findings of the study, some changes were made to the magazine. For instance new columns on counseling, family health and women's issues were added. Pages allocated to the less popular topics such as recipes, handicrafts, and short stories were reduced. A new column on competitions was also added based on the feedback obtained. The respondents also suggested that they should receive the magazine before it is sold on the newsstands.

6. Effectiveness of IEC Publications

The aim of the study was to study the degree of exposure to IEC publications such as pamphlets and booklets on contraceptive methods among those who have attended dialogue sessions; and to investigate the (independent) effects of such exposure on contraceptive use as well as the propensity to talk about family planning. The respondents were those who attended dialogue sessions during a 18 month period in six states. A total of 1190 respondents were selected based on the probability proportional to size procedure.

The number of respondents chosen from each category and the level of stratification were proportional to the number who attended the dialog sessions within the different levels of stratification from the records obtained from the state information offices. The stratification variables are places of residence and ethnicity.

Out of the total sample, only 723 respondents (60%) were contacted and interviewed. Of the sample loss, 56% were due to failure in locating the respondents, 24% had moved out, and 10.5% could not be contacted after even three visits. The IEC publications evaluated include a booklet on methods of contraception, pamphlets on family planning methods, family planning bulletin, flip charts and posters.

Findings showed that about two-thirds of the respondents are exposed to at least one such printed matter. Such exposure varies significantly by socio-economic strata. The strong positive association between exposure to IEC publications and contraceptives used is manifested by the large differentials in the proportion currently using a contraceptive method in the following proportions : 28 Vs 41% for the Malays (28% among the non-exposed and 41% among the exposed were currently using a contraceptive method) and 31

Vs 68% for the Chinese. In contrast the exposure to IEC publications has no effect on in the contraceptive behavior of Indians. For all the three ethnic groups, those who have been exposed to IEC publications appear to be more vocal about family planning than those who have not.

The analysis suggest that IEC publications do have significant influence over fertility behavior and hence could be utilized to improve family planning programmes. The content of IEC publications should be improved from time to time in view of new developments in contraceptive technology. Possible side effects should be adequately dealt with in the printed IEC materials so that couples are properly guided in choosing a contraceptive method.

7. Pre-testing of Publications

The Information, Education and Communication Division of the Board regularly produces various publications and materials aimed at educating the general public and specific target audiences on issues related to population, family development and reproductive health. Some of the materials produced include bulletin such as Update, POFAM and Keluarga, booklets, pamphlets, posters, etc. These materials are sometimes pre-tested before they are printed and distributed to its target audience. Crucial to effective communication is the testing of messages among its intended target audience.

8. Monitoring of Field Activities

The IEC activities that are planned and implemented by the NPFDB, both at the national and state level, are monitored and assessed using a computerized system that has been developed by the IEC Division and Computer unit. The main objective of the field activities monitoring system is to have a data bank whereby it is possible to have on-line data retrieval of information related to the IEC field programme such as : planned activities by state, district and type of activities; number and profile of participants for each activity, number of activities conducted by each field officer, budget for each activity, family development topics covered and issues raised; and IEC materials distributed. Monitoring and assessment are

seen as essential ingredients of success, not tests of staff performance.

Other Communication Research studies conducted include pre-testing of IEC materials before publication, evaluation of the National Family Day activities, evaluation of the effectiveness of the Bulletin Update (a medical bulletin produced once every two months), evaluation on the needs of the library users and evaluation of the Board's video programmes.

Problems Faced

Some of the problems faced in conducting communication research include the difficulty of evaluating the impact of the family development programme because the effects are intangible and not measurable. Its difficult to define the goals in measurable

non-ambiguous terms and to have a clearly defined criteria of success. Another difficulty is how to establish/develop indications or valid measures to determine the true impact of the intervention as opposed to the impact or influence of extraneous causal factors.

Conclusion

While communication is a crucial component of the Family Development Programme, communication research is in turn essential to make communication itself work more effectively and thereby assist the implementation of the family development programme.

The value of communication research depends not only on the research findings but on the application of these findings to improve family development programmes. To ensure that communication research findings are utilized in programme development and implementation, they must be timely, valid, useful and applicable.

Thus while many communication research studies have been conducted by the NPFDB there are still certain gaps which need to be filled, in so far as they relate directly to the urgent task of strengthening the implementation of family development programme. One major challenge is to explore what more can be done to enhance the role of communication research in the Board's IEC programme.

Anjli Panalal Doshi is an Acting Director of Family and Parental Development, National population & Family Development Board, Malaysia.

Author

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